

A. C. BENSON

REF
Essays of
To-day and Yesterday

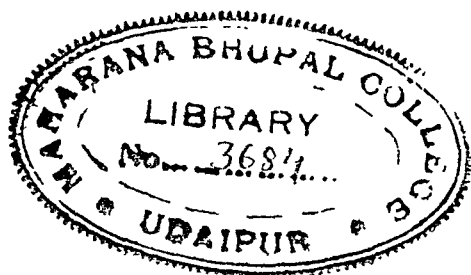
First Volumes

PHILIP GUEDALLA
JAMES AGATE
BASIL MACDONALD
HASTINGS
BARRY PAIN
ALICE MEYNELL
DAVID GRAYSON
ALLAN MONKHOUSE
A. C. BENSON
ANDREW LANG
ARNOLD BENNETT
A. G. GARDINER
HILAIRE BELLOC
C. E. MONTAGUE
AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

*Many other volumes in active
preparation*

ESSAYS OF
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

A. C.
BENSON



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.
LONDON CALCUTTA SYDNEY

64
11

First published 1926
by GEORGE G HARRAP & CO LTD.
39-41 Parker Street, Kingsway, London, W.C 2

2

Printed in Great Britain at THE BALLANTYNE PRESS by
SPOTTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE & CO, LTD
Colchester, London & Eton

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE wide sympathy and intimate understanding which were so apparent in all that Arthur Christopher Benson ever wrote endeared him to a very wide circle of readers. The position he thus achieved was one that we might almost say was peculiar to himself. In a manner that is given to very few he was able to convey his personal charm and kindliness through the unpromising medium of the printed page, so that thousands who had never seen him felt that he was a friend to whom they might go for comfort and consolation. They never went in vain, for Benson had a kindly tolerance that embraced everybody except, perhaps, the superior, self-sufficient person. His is the wisdom that can look suffering in the face and emerge from the ordeal, not callous, nor even stoical, but serene. He hates affectations. "Direct bookish talk," he says, "is my abomination." He appraises success at its true worth, and exalts the homely virtues at the expense of the more showy social qualities. He sympathizes with the bashful and the timid, and is ever ready to help them with words of practical encouragement. A kindly, companionable man, he had the rare quality of being able to give advice without seeming pontifical.

He was born in 1862, and was a master at Eton for nearly twenty years. In 1904 he was elected Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, becoming Master in 1915—a post which he held till the time of his death in 1925. His interests were many and widely varied.

A. C. BENSON

Not only as essayist, but also as poet, biographer, and educationist, he exercised a far-reaching and wholesome influence upon contemporary letters.

Thanks are due to Mr John Murray and the authorities of Magdalene College, Cambridge, for permission to reprint the essays contained in this selection.

F. H. P.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FEARS	9
From <i>The House of Quiet</i>	
SUCCESS	15
From <i>The House of Quiet</i>	
BOOKS	21
From <i>From a College Window</i>	
CANTERBURY TOWER	35
From <i>The Thread of Gold</i>	
SWITZERLAND	38
From <i>The Altar Fire</i>	
HOME	43
From <i>The Altar Fire</i>	
SHYNESS	46
From <i>At Large</i>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

FEARS

IF anyone whose eye may fall upon these pages be absolutely equable of temperament, serene, contented, the same one day as another, as Dr Johnson said of Reynolds, let him not read this chapter—he will think it a mere cry in the dark, better smothered in the bed-clothes, an unmanly piece of morbid pathology, a secret and sordid disease better undivulged, on which all persons of proper pride should hold their peace.

Well, it is not for him that I write; there are books and books, and even chapters and chapters, just as there are people and people. I myself avoid books dealing with health and disease. I used when younger to be unable to resist the temptation of a medical book; but now I am wiser, and if I sometimes yield to the temptation, it is with a backward glancing eye and a cautious step. And I will say that I generally put back the book with a snap, in a moment, as though a snake had stung me. But there will be no pathology here—nothing but a patient effort to look a failing in the face, and to suggest a remedy.

I speak to the initiated, to those who have gone down into the dark cave, and seen the fire burn low in the hrine, and watched aghast the formless, mouldering things—hideous implements are they, or mere weapons?—that hang upon the walls.

Do you know what it is to dwell, perhaps for days together, under the shadow of a fear? Perhaps a definite fear—a fear of poverty, or a fear of obloquy, or a fear of harshness, or a fear of pain, or a fear of disease—

A. C. BENSON

or, worse than all, a boding, misshapen, sullen dread which has no definite cause, and is therefore the harder to resist.

These moods, I say it with gratitude for myself and for the encouragement of others, tend to diminish in acuteness and in frequency as I grow older. They are now, as ever, preluded by dreams of a singular kind, dreams of rapid and confused action, dreams of a romantic and exaggerated pictorial character—huge mountain ranges, lofty and venerable buildings, landscapes of incredible beauty, gardens of unimaginable luxuriance, which pass with incredible rapidity before the mind. I will indicate two of these in detail. I was in a vessel like a yacht, armed with a massive steel prow like a ram, which moved in some aerial fashion over a landscape, skimming it seemed to me but a few feet above the ground. A tall man of benignant aspect stood upon the bridge, and directed the operations of the unseen navigator. We ascended a heathery valley, and presently encountered snow-drifts, upon which the vessel seemed to settle down to her full speed; at last we entered a prodigious snowfield, with vast ridged snow-waves extending in every direction for miles; the vessel ran not over but through these waves, sending up huge spouts of snow which fell in cool showers upon my head and hands, while the tinkle of dry ice fragments made a perpetual low music. At last we stopped and I descended on to the plateau. Far ahead, through rolling clouds, I saw the black snow-crowned heights of a mountain, loftier than any seen by human eye, and for leagues round me lay the interminable waste of snow. I was aroused from my absorption by a voice behind me; the vessel started again on her course with

a leap like a porpoise, and though I screamed aloud to stop her, I saw her, in a few seconds, many yards ahead, describing great curves as she ran, with the snow spouting over her like a fountain.

The second was a very different scene. I was in the vine-clad alleys of some Italian garden; against the still blue air a single stone pine defined itself; I walked along a path, and turning a corner an exquisite conventual building of immense size, built of a light brown stone, revealed itself. From all the alleys round emerged troops of monastic figures in soft white gowns, and a mellow chime of exceeding sweetness floated from the building. I saw that I too was robed like the rest; but the gliding figures outstripped me; and arriving last at a great iron portal I found it closed, and the strains of a great organ came drowsily from within.

Then into the dream falls a sudden sense of despair, like an ashen cloud; a feeling of incredible agony, intensified by the beauty of the surrounding scene, that agony which feverishly questions as to why so dark a stroke should fall when the mind seems at peace with itself and lost in dreamy wonder at the loveliness all about it. Then the vision closes, and for a time the mind battles with dark waves of anguish, emerging at last, like a diver from a dim sea, into the waking consciousness. The sickly daylight filters through the window curtains and the familiar room swims into sight. The first thought is one of unutterable relief, which is struck instantly out of the mind by the pounce of the troubled mood; and then follows a ghastly hour, when every possibility of horror and woe intangible presses in upon the battling mind. At such moments

A. C. BENSON

a definite difficulty, a practical problem would be welcome—but there is none; the misery is too deep for thought, and even when, after long wrestling, the knowledge comes that it is all a subjective condition, and that there is no adequate cause in life or circumstances for this unmanning terror—even then it can only be silently endured, like the racking of some fierce physical pain.

The day that succeeds to such a waking mood is almost the worst part of the experience. Shaken and dizzyed by the inrush of woe, the mind straggles wearily through hour after hour; the familiar duties are intolerable; food has no savour; action and thought no interest; and if for an hour the tired head is diverted by some passing event, or if, oppressed with utter exhaustion, it sinks into an unrefreshing slumber, repose but gives the strength to suffer—the accursed mood leaps again, as from an unseen lair, upon the unnerved consciousness, and tears like some strange beast the helpless and palpitating soul.

When first, at Cambridge, I had the woeful experiences above recorded, I was so unused to endurance, so bewildered by suffering, that I think for awhile I was almost beside myself. I recollect going down with some friends, in a brief lull of misery, to watch a football match, when the horror seized me in the middle of a cheerful talk with such vehemence, that I could only rush off with a muttered word, and return to my rooms, in which I immured myself to spend an hour in an agony of prayer. Again I recollect sitting with some of the friends of my own age after Hall; we were smoking and talking peacefully enough—for some days my torment had been suspended—when all at once, out

of the secret darkness the terror leapt upon me, and after in vain resisting it for a few moments, I hurried away, having just enough self-respect to glance at my watch and mutter something about a forgotten engagement. But worst of all was a walk taken with my closest friend on a murky November day. We started in good spirits, when in a moment the accursed foe was upon me; I hardly spoke except for fitful questions. Our way led us to a level crossing, beside a belt of woodland, where a huge luggage train was jolting and bumping backwards and forwards. We hung upon the gate; and then, and then only, came upon me in a flash an almost irresistible temptation to lay my head beneath the ponderous wheels, and end it all; I could only pray in silence, and hurry from the spot in speechless agitation. What wonder if I heard on the following day that my friend complained that I was altering for the worse—that I had become so sullen and morose that it was no use talking to me?

Gradually, very gradually, the aching frost of the soul broke up and thawed; little trifling encouraging incidents—a small success or two, an article accepted by a magazine, a friendship, an athletic victory, raised me step by step out of the gloom. One benefit, even at the time, it brought me—an acute sensitiveness to beauty both of sight and sound. I used to steal at evensong into the dark nave of King's Chapel, and the sight of the screen, the flood of subdued light overflowing from the choir, the carven angels with their gilded trumpets, penetrated into the soul with an exquisite sweetness; and still more the music—whether the low prelude with the whispering pedals, the severe monotone breaking into freshets of harmony, the swing

A. C. BENSON

and richness of the chants, or the elaborate beauty of some familiar magnificat or anthem—all fell like showers upon the arid sense. The music at King's had one characteristic that I have never heard elsewhere; the properties of the building are such that the echo lingers without blurring the successive chords—not “loth to die,” I used to think, as Wordsworth says, but sinking as it were from consciousness to dream, and from dream to death.

One further gain—the greater—was that my suffering did not, I think, withdraw me wholly into myself and fence me from the world; rather it gave me a sense of the brotherhood of grief. I was one with all the agonies that lie silent in the shadow of life; and though my suffering had no tangible cause, yet I was initiated into the fellowship of those who *bear*. I *understood*;—weak, faithless, and faulty as I was, I was no longer in the complacent isolation of the strong, the successful, the selfish, and even in my darkest hour I had strength to thank God for that.

From “The House of Quiet”

SUCCESS

October 21, 1898

I HAVE been reading some of my old diaries to-day; and I am tempted to try and disentangle, as far as I can, the *motif* that seems to me to underlie my simple life.

One question above all others has constantly recurred to my mind; and the answer to it is the sum of my slender philosophy.

The question then is this: is a simple, useful, dignified, happy life possible to most of us without the stimulus of affairs, of power, of fame? I answer unhesitatingly that such a life is possible. The tendency of the age is to measure success by publicity, not to think highly of any person or any work unless it receives 'recognition,' to think it essential to happiness *monstrari digito*, to be in the swim, to be a personage.

I admit at once the temptation; to such successful persons comes the consciousness of influence, the feeling of power, the anxious civilities of the undistinguished, the radiance of self-respect, the atmosphere of flattering, subtle deference, the seduction of which not even the most independent and noble characters can escape. Indeed, many an influential man of simple character and unpretending virtue, who rates such conveniences of life at their true value, and does not pursue them as an end, would be disagreeably conscious of the lack of these *petits soins* if he adopted an unpopular cause or for any reason forfeited the influence which begets them.

A friend of mine came to see me the other day from a visit to a great house. His host was a man of high cabinet rank, the inheritor of an ample fortune and a historic name, who has been held by his near friends to cling to political life longer than prudence would warrant. My friend told me that he had been left alone one evening with his host, who had, half humorously, half seriously, indulged in a lengthy tirade against the pressure of social duties and unproductive drudgery that his high position involved. "If they would only let me alone!" he said; "I think it very hard that in the evening of my days I cannot order my life to suit my tastes. I have served the public long enough. . . . I would read—how I would read—and when I was bored I would sleep in my chair."

"And yet," my friend said, commenting on these unguarded statements, "I believe he is the only person of his intimate circle who does not know that he would be hopelessly bored—that the things he decries are the very breath of life to him. There is absolutely no reason why he should not at once and forever realize his fancied ideal—and if his wife and children do not urge him to do so, it is only because they know that he would be absolutely miserable." And this is true of many lives.

If the 'recognition,' of which I have spoken above were only accorded to the really eminent, it would be a somewhat different matter; but nine-tenths of the persons who receive it are nothing more than phantom who have set themselves to pursue the glory, without the services that ought to earn it. A great many people have a strong taste for power without work, for dignity without responsibility; and it is quite possible

to attain consideration if you set yourself resolutely to pursue it.

The temptation comes in a yet more subtle form to men of a really high-minded type, whose chief pre-occupation is earnest work and the secluded pursuit of some high ideal. Such people, though they do not wish to fetter themselves with the empty social duties that assail the eminent, yet are tempted to wish to have the refusal of them, and to be secretly dissatisfied if they do not receive this testimonial to the value of their work. The temptation is not so vulgar as it seems. Every one who is ambitious wishes to be effective. A man does not write books or paint pictures or make speeches simply to amuse himself, to fill his time; and they are few who can genuinely write, as the late Mark Pattison wrote of a period of his life, that his ideal was at one time "defiled and polluted by literary ambition."

Nevertheless, if there is to be any real attempt to win the inner peace of the spirit, such ambition must be not sternly but serenely resisted. Not until a man can pass by the rewards of fame *oculis irretortis*—"nor cast one longing, lingering look behind"—is the victory won.

It may be urged, in my case, that the obscurity for which I crave was never likely to be denied me. True; but at the same time ambition in its pettiest and most childish forms has been and is a real temptation to me: the ambition to dominate and dazzle my immediate circle, to stimulate curiosity about myself, to be considered, if not a successful man, at least a man who might have succeeded if he had cared to try—all the temptations which are depicted in so masterly and merciless a way by that acute psychologist Mr Henry James in the character of Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a*

A. C. BENSON

Lady—to all of these I plead guilty. Had I not been gifted with sufficient sensitiveness to see how singularly offensive and pitiful such pretences are in the case of others, I doubt if I should not have succumbed—indeed I have not somewhat succumbed—to them.

Indeed, to some morbid natures such pretences are vital—nay, self-respect would be impossible without them. I know a lady who, like Mrs Witterly, is really kept alive by the excitement of being an invalid. If she had not been so ill she would have died years ago. I know a worthy gentleman who lives in London and spends his time in hurrying from house to house lamenting how little time he can get to do what he really enjoys—to read or think. Another has come to my mind who lives in a charming house in the country, and by dint of inviting a few second-rate literary and artistic people to his house and entertaining them royally, believes himself to be at the very centre of literary and artistic life, and essential to its continuance. These are harmless lives, not unhappy, not useless; based, it is true, upon a false conception of the relative importance of their own existence, but then is there one of us—the most hard-working, influential, useful person in the world—who does not exaggerate his own importance? Does anyone realize how little essential he is, or how easily his post is filled—indeed, how many people there are who believe that they could do the same thing better if they only had the chance?

A life to be happy must be compounded in due degree of activity and pleasure, using the word in its best sense. There must be sufficient activity to take off the perilous and acrid humours of the mind which, left to them-

elves, poison the sources of life, and enough pleasure to make the prospect of life palatable.

The first necessity is to get rid, as life goes on, of all conventional pleasures. By the age of forty a man should know what he enjoys, and not continue doing things intended to be pleasurable, either because he deludes himself into thinking that he enjoys them, or because he likes others to think that he enjoys them. I know now that I do not care for casual country-house visiting, for dancing, for garden parties, for cricket matches, and many another form of social distraction, but that the pleasures that remain and grow are the pleasures derived from books, from the sights and sounds of nature, from sympathetic conversation, from music, and from active physical exercise in the open air. It is my belief that a man is happiest who is so far employed that he has to scheme to secure a certain share of such pleasures. My own life unhappily is so ordered that it is the other way that I have to scheme to secure sufficient activities to make such pleasure wholesome. But I am stern with myself. At times when I find the zest of simple home pleasures deserting me, I have sufficient self-control deliberately to spend a week in London, which I detest, or to pay a duty-visit where I am so acutely and sharply bored by a dull society—*castigatio mea matutina est*—that I return with delicious enthusiasm to my own trivial round.

I do not flatter myself that I hold any very important place in the world's economy. But I believe that I have humbly contributed somewhat to the happiness of others, and I find that the reward for thwarted, wasted ambitions has come in the shape of a daily increasing joy in quiet things and tender simplicities. I need not

A. C. BENSON

reiterate the fact that I draw from Nature, ever more and more, the most unfailing and the purest joy; and if I have forfeited some of the deepest and most thrilling emotions of the human heart, it is but what thousands are compelled to do; and it is something to find that the heart can be sweet and tranquil without them. The only worth of these pages must rest in the fact that the life which I have tried to depict is made up of elements which are within the reach of all or nearly all human beings. And though I cannot claim to have invented a religious system, or to have originated any new or startling theory of existence, yet I have proved by experiment that a life beset by many disadvantages, and deprived of most of the stimulus that to some would seem essential, need not drift into being discontented or evil or cold or hard.

From "The House of Quiet"

BOOKS

THE one room in my College which I always enter with a certain sense of desolation and sadness is the College Library. There used to be a story in my days at Cambridge of a book-collecting don who was fond of discoursing in public of the various crosses he had to bear. He was lamenting one day in Hall the unwieldy size of his library. "I really don't know what to do with my books," he said, and looked round for sympathy. "Why not read them?" said a sharp and caustic Fellow opposite. It may be thought that I am in need of the same advice, but it is not the case. There are, indeed, many books in our library; but most of them, as D. G. Rossetti used to say in his childhood of his father's learned volumes, are "no good for reading." The books of the College library are delightful, indeed, to look at; rows upon rows of big irregular volumes, with tarnished tooling and faded gilding on the sun-scorched backs. What are they? old editions of classics, old volumes of controversial divinity, folios of the Fathers, topographical treatises, cumbrous philosophers, pamphlets from which, like dry ashes, the heat of the fire that warmed them once has fled. Take one down: it is an agreeable sight enough; there is a gentle scent of antiquity; the bumpy page crackles faintly; the big irregular print meets the eye with a pleasant and leisurely mellowness. But what do they tell one? Very little, alas! that one need know, very much which it would be a positive mistake to believe. That is the worst of erudition—that the next scholar

A. C. BENSON

sucks the few drops of honey that you have accumulated, sets right your blunders, and you are superseded. You have handed on the torch, perhaps, and even trimmed it. Your errors, your patient explanations, were a necessary step in the progress of knowledge; but even now the procession has turned the corner, and is out of sight.

Yet even here, it pleases me to think, some mute and unsuspected treasure may lurk unknown. In a room like this, for over a couple of centuries, stood on one of the shelves an old rudely bound volume of blank paper, the pages covered with a curious straggling cipher; no one paid any heed to it, no one tried to spell its secrets. But the day came when a Fellow who was both inquisitive and leisurely took up the old volume, and formed a resolve to decipher it. Through many baffling delays, through many patient windings, he carried his purpose out; and the result was a celebrated Day-book, which cast much light upon the social conditions of a past age, as well as revealed one of the most simple and genial personalities that ever marched blithely through the pages of a Diary.

But, in these days of cheap print and nasty paper, with a central library into which pours the annual cataract of literature, these little ancient libraries have no use left, save as repositories or store-rooms. They belong to the days when books were few and expensive; when few persons could acquire a library of their own; when lecturers accumulated knowledge that was not the property of the world; when notes were laboriously copied and handed on; when one of the joys of learning was the consciousness of possessing secrets not known to other men. An ancient Dean of Christ Church is

said to have given three reasons for the study of Greek: the first was that it enabled you to read the words of the Saviour in the original tongue; the second, that it gave you a proper contempt for those who were ignorant of it; and the third was that it led to situations of emolument. What a rich aroma hangs about this judgment! The first reason is probably erroneous, the second is un-Christian, and the third is a gross motive which would equally apply to any professional training whatsoever.

Well, the knowledge of Greek, except for the school-master and the clergyman, has not now the same obvious commercial value. Knowledge is more diffused, more accessible. It is no longer thought to be a secret, precious, rather terrible possession; the possessor is no longer venerated and revered; on the contrary, a learned man is rather considered likely to be tiresome. Old folios have, indeed, become merely the stock-in-trade of the illustrators of sensational novels. Who does not know the absurd old man, with white silky hair, velvet skull-cap, and venerable appearance, who sits reading a folio at an oak table, and who turns out to be the villain of the piece, a mine of secret and unsuccessful wickedness? But no one in real life reads a folio now, because anything that is worth reprinting, as well as a good deal that is not, is reprinted in convenient form, if not in England, at least in Germany.

And the result of it is that these College libraries are almost wholly unvisited. It seems a pity, but it also seems inevitable. I wish that some use could be devised for them, for these old books make at all events a very dignified and pleasant background, and the fragrance of well-warmed old leather is a delicate thing. But they

A. C. BENSON

are not even good places for working in, now that one has one's own books and one's own reading-chair. Moreover, if they were kept up to date, which would in itself be an expensive thing, there would come in the eternal difficulty of where to put the old books, which no one would have the heart to destroy.

Perhaps the best thing for a library like this would be not to attempt to buy books, but to subscribe like a club to a circulating library, and to let a certain number of new volumes flow through the place and lie upon the tables for a time. But, on the other hand, here in the University there seems to be little time for general reading; and indeed it is a great problem, as life goes on, as duties grow more defined, and as one becomes more and more conscious of the shortness of life, what the duty of a cultivated and open-minded man is with regard to general reading. I am inclined to think that as one grows older one may read less; it is impossible to keep up with the vast output of literature, and it is hard enough to find time to follow even the one or two branches in which one is specially interested. Almost the only books which, I think, it is a duty to read, are the lives of great contemporaries; one gets thus to have an idea of what is going on in the world, and to realize it from different points of view. New fiction, new poetry, new travels are very hard to peruse diligently. The effort, I confess, of beginning a new novel, of making acquaintance with an unfamiliar scene, of getting the individualities of a fresh group of people into one's head, is becoming every year harder for me; but there are still one or two authors of fiction for whom I have a predilection, and whose works I look out for. New poetry demands an even greater effort; and as to

travels, they are written so much in the journalistic style, and consist so much of the meals our traveller obtains at wayside stations, of conversations with obviously reticent and even unintelligent persons; they have so many photogravures of places that are exactly like other places, and of complacent people in grotesque costumes, like supers in a play, that one feels the whole thing to be hopelessly superficial and unreal. Imagine a journalistic foreigner visiting the University, lunching at the station refreshment-room, hurrying to half a dozen of the best-known colleges, driving in a tram through the main thoroughfares, looking on at a football match, interviewing a Town Councillor, and being presented to the Vice-Chancellor—what would be the profit of such a record as he could give us? What would he have seen of the quiet daily life, the interests, the home-current of the place? The only books of travel worth reading are those where a person has settled deliberately in an unknown place, really lived the life of the people, and penetrated the secret of the landscape and the buildings.

I wish very much that there was a really good literary paper, with an editor of catholic tastes, and half a dozen stimulating specialists on the staff, whose duty would be to read the books that came out, each in his own line, write reviews of appreciation and not of contemptuous fault-finding, let feeble books alone, and make it their business to tell ordinary people what to read, not saving them the trouble of reading the books that are worth reading, but sparing them the task of glancing at a good many books that are not worth reading. Literary papers, as a rule, either review a book with hopeless rapidity, or tend to lag behind too much. It would be

A. C. BENSON

of the essence of such a paper as I have described, that there should be no delay about telling one what to look out for, and at the same time that the reviews should be deliberate and careful.

But I think that as one grows older one may take out a licence, so to speak, to read less. One may go back to the old restful books, where one knows the characters well, hear the old remarks, survey the same scenes. One may meditate more upon one's stores, stroll about more, just looking at life, seeing the quiet things that are happening, and beaming through one's spectacles. One ought to have amassed, as life goes on and the shadows lengthen, a good deal of material for reflection. And, after all, reading is not in itself a virtue; it is only one way of passing the time; talking is another way, watching things another. Bacon says that reading makes a full man; well, I cannot help thinking that many people are full to the brim when they reach the age of forty, and that much which they afterwards put into the overcharged vase merely drips and slobbers uncomfortably down the side and foot.

The thing to determine then, as one's brain hardens or softens, is what the object of reading is. It is not, I venture to think, what used to be called the pursuit of knowledge. Of course, if a man is a professional teacher or a professional writer, he must read for professional purposes, just as a coral insect must eat to enable it to secrete the substances out of which it builds its branching house. But I am not here speaking of professional studies, but of general reading. I suppose that there are three motives for reading—the first, purely pleasurable; the second, intellectual; the third, what may be called ethical. As to the first, a man who reads at all,

reads just as he eats, sleeps, and takes exercise, because he likes it; and that is probably the best reason that can be given for the practice. It is an innocent mode of passing the time, it takes one out of oneself, it is amusing. Of course, it can be carried to an excess; and a man may become a mere book-eater, as a man may become an opium-eater. I used at one time to go and stay with an old friend, a clergyman in a remote part of England. He was a bachelor and fairly well off. He did not care about exercise or his garden, and he had no taste for general society. He subscribed to the London Library and to a lending library in the little town where he lived, and he bought, too, a good many books. He must have spent, I used to calculate, about ten hours of the twenty-four reading. He seemed to me to have read everything, old and new books alike, and he had an astonishing memory; anything that he put into his mind remained there exactly as fresh and clear as when he laid it away, so that he never needed to read a book twice. If he had lived at a University he would have been a useful man; if one wanted to know what books to read in any line, one had only to pick his brains. He could give one a list of authorities on almost every subject. But in his country parish he was entirely thrown away. He had not the least desire to make anything of his stores, or to write. He had not the art of expression, and he was a distinctly tiresome talker. His idea of conversation was to ask you whether you had read a number of modern novels. If he found one that you had not read, he sketched the plot in an intolerably prolix manner, so that it was practically impossible to fix the mind on what he was saying. He seemed to have no preferences in literature whatever; his one desire

A. C. BENSON

was to read everything that came out, and his only idea of a holiday was to go up to London and get lists of books from a bookseller. That is, of course, an extreme case; and I cannot help feeling that he would have been nearly as usefully employed if he had confined himself to counting the number of words in the books he read. But, after all, he was interested and amused, and a perfectly contented man.

As to the intellectual motive for reading, it hardly needs discussing; the object is to get clear conceptions, to arrive at a critical sense of what is good in literature, to have a knowledge of events and tendencies of thought, to take a just view of history and of great personalities; not to be at the mercy of theorists, but to be able to correct a faulty bias by having a large and wide view of the progress of events and the development of thought. One who reads from this point of view will generally find some particular line which he tends to follow, some special region of the mind where he is desirous to know all that can be known; but he will, at the same time, wish to acquaint himself in a general way with other departments of thought, so that he may be interested in subjects in which he is not wholly well-informed, and be able to listen, even to ask intelligent questions, in matters with which he has no minute acquaintance. Such a man, if he steers clear of the contempt for indefinite views which is often the curse of men with clear and definite minds, makes the best kind of talker, stimulating and suggestive; his talk seems to open doors into gardens and corridors of the house of thought; and others, whose knowledge is fragmentary, would like to be at home, too, in that pleasant palace. But it is of the essence of such talk that it should be natural and

attractive, not professional or didactic. People who are not used to Universities tend to believe that academical persons are invariably formidable. They think of them as possessed of vast stores of precise knowledge, and actuated by a merciless desire to detect and to ridicule deficiencies of attainment among unprofessional people. Of course, there are people of this type to be found at a University, just as in all other professions it is possible to find uncharitable specialists who despise persons of hazy and leisurely views. But my own impression is that it is a rare type among University dons; I think that it is far commoner at the University to meet men of great attainments combined with sincere humility and charity, for the simple reason that the most erudite specialist at a University becomes aware both of the wide diversity of knowledge and of his own limitations as well.

Personally, direct bookish talk is my abomination. A knowledge of books ought to give a man a delicate allusiveness, an aptitude for pointed quotation. A book ought to be only incidentally, not anatomically, discussed; and I am pleased to be able to think that there is a good deal of this allusive talk at the University, and that the only reason that there is not more is that professional demands are so insistent, and work so thorough, that academical persons cannot keep up their general reading as they would like to do.

And then we come to what I have called, for want of a better word, the ethical motive for reading; it might sound at first as if I meant that people ought to read improving books, but that is exactly what I do not mean. I have very strong opinions on this point, and hold that what I call the ethical motive for reading is

the best of all—indeed the only true one. And yet I find a great difficulty in putting into words what is a very elusive and delicate thought. But my belief is this. As I make my slow pilgrimage through the world, a certain sense of beautiful mystery seems to gather and grow. I see that many people find the world dreary—and, indeed, there must be spaces of dreariness in it for us all—some find it interesting; some surprising; some find it entirely satisfactory. But those who find it satisfactory seem to me, as a rule, to be tough, coarse, healthy natures, who find success attractive and food digestible; who do not trouble their heads very much about other people, but go cheerfully and optimistically on their way, closing their eyes as far as possible to things painful and sorrowful, and getting all the pleasure they can out of material enjoyments.

Well, to speak very sincerely and humbly, such a life seems to me the worst kind of failure. It is the life that men were living in the days of Noah, and out of such lives comes nothing that is wise or useful or good. Such men leave the world as they found it, except for the fact that they have eaten a little way into it, like a mite into a cheese, and leave a track of decomposition behind them.

I do not know why so much that is hard and painful and sad is interwoven with our life here; but I see, or seem to see, that it is meant to be so interwoven. All the best and most beautiful flowers of character and thought seem to me to spring up in the track of suffering; and what is the most sorrowful of all mysteries, the mystery of death, the ceasing to be, the relinquishing of our hopes and dreams, the breaking of our dearest ties, becomes more solemn and awe-inspiring the nearer we advance to it

I do not mean that we are to go and search for unhappiness; but, on the other hand, the only happiness worth seeking for is a happiness which takes all these dark things into account, looks them in the face, reads the secret of their dim eyes and set lips, dwells with them, and learns to be tranquil in their presence.

In this mood—and it is a mood which no thoughtful man can hope or ought to wish to escape—reading becomes less and less a searching for instructive and impressive facts, and more and more a quest after wisdom and truth and emotion. More and more I feel the impenetrability of the mystery that surrounds us; the phenomena of nature, the discoveries of science, instead of raising the veil, seem only to make the problem more complex, more bizarre, more insoluble; the investigation of the laws of light, of electricity, of chemical action, of the causes of disease, the influence of heredity—all these things may minister to our convenience and our health, but they make the mind of God, the nature of the First Cause, an infinitely more mysterious and inconceivable problem.

But there still remains, inside, so to speak, of these astonishing facts, a whole range of intimate personal phenomena, of emotion, of relationship, of mental or spiritual conceptions, such as beauty, affection, righteousness, which seem to be an even nearer concern, even more vital to our happiness than the vast laws of which it is possible for men to be so unconscious, that centuries have rolled past without their being investigated.

And thus in such a mood reading becomes a patient tracing out of human emotion, human feeling, when confronted with the sorrows, the hopes, the motives,

A. C. BENSON

the sufferings which beckon us and threaten us on every side. One desires to know what pure and wise and high-hearted natures have made of the problem; one desires to let the sense of beauty—that most spiritual of all pleasures—sink deeper into the heart; one desires to share the thoughts and hopes, the dreams and visions, in the strength of which the human spirit has risen superior to suffering and death.

And thus, as I say, the reading that is done in such a mood has little of precise acquisition or definite attainment about it; it is a desire rather to feed and console the spirit—to enter the region in which it seems better to wonder than to know, to aspire rather than to define, to hope rather than to be satisfied. A spirit which walks expectantly along this path grows to learn that the secret of such happiness as we can attain lies in simplicity and courage, in sincerity and loving-kindness; it grows more and more averse to material ambitions and mean aims; it more and more desires silence and recollection and contemplation. In this mood, the words of the wise fall like the tolling of sweet, grave bells upon the soul, the dreams of poets come like music heard at evening from the depth of some enchanted forest, wafted over a wide water; we know not what instrument it is whence the music wells, by what fingers swept, by what lips blown; but we know that there is some presence there that is sorrowful or glad, who has power to translate his dream into the concord of sweet sounds. Such a mood need not withdraw us from life, from toil, from kindly relationships, from deep affections; but it will rather send us back to life with a renewed and joyful zest, with a desire to discern the true quality of beautiful things, of fair thoughts, of

courageous hopes, of wise designs. It will make us tolerant and forgiving, patient with stubbornness and prejudice, simple in conduct, sincere in word, gentle in deed; with pity for weakness, with affection for the lonely and the desolate, with admiration for all that is noble and serene and strong.

Those who read in such a spirit will tend to resort more and more to large and wise and beautiful books, to press the sweetness out of old familiar thoughts, to look more for warmth and loftiness of feeling than for elaborate and artful expression. They will value more and more books that speak to the ear and to the mind. They will realize that it is through wisdom and force and nobility that books retain their hold upon the hearts of men, and not by briskness and colour and epigram. A mind thus stored may have little grasp of facts, little garniture of paradox and jest; but it will be full of compassion and hope, of gentleness and joy. . . .

Well, this thought has taken me a long way from the College library, where the old books look somewhat pathetically from the shelves, like aged dogs wondering why no one takes them for a walk. Monuments of pathetic labour, tasks patiently fulfilled through slow hours! But yet I am sure that a great deal of joy went to the making of them, the joy of the old scholar who settled down soberly among his papers, and heard the silvery bell above him tell out the dear hours that, perhaps, he would have delayed if he could. Yes, the old books are a tender-hearted and a joyful company; the days slip past, the sunlight moves round the court, and steals warmly for an hour or two into the deserted room. Life—delightful life—spins merrily past; the perennial stream of youth flows on; and perhaps the

A. C. BENSON

best that the old books can do for us is to bid us cast back a wistful and loving thought into the past—a little gift of love for the old labourers who wrote so diligently in the forgotten hours, till the weary, failing hand laid down the familiar pen, and soon lay silent in the dust.

From "From a College Window"

CANTERBURY TOWER

TO-DAY I had a singular pleasure heightened by an intermingled strangeness and even terror—qualities which bring out the quality of pleasure in the same way that a bourdon in a pedal-point passage brings out the quality of what a German would, I think, call the *over-work*. I was at *Canterbury*, where the great central tower is wreathed with scaffolding, and has a dim, blurred outline from a distance, as though it were being rapidly shaken to and fro. I found a friendly and communicable man who offered to take me over it; we climbed a dizzy little winding stair, with bright glimpses at intervals, through loop-holes, of sunlight and wheeling birds; then we crept along the top of a vaulted space with great pockets of darkness to right and left. Soon we were in the gallery of the lantern, from which we could see the little people crawling on the floor beneath, like slow insects. And then we mounted a short ladder which took us out of one of the great belfry windows, on to the lowest of the planked galleries. What a frail and precarious structure it seemed: the planks bent beneath our feet. And here came the first exquisite delight—that of being close to the precipitous face of the tower, of seeing the carved work which had never been seen close at hand since its erection except by the jackdaws and pigeons. I was moved and touched by observing how fine and delicate all the sculpture was. There were rows and rows of little heraldic devices, which from below could appear only as tiny fretted points; yet every petal of rose or *fleur-*

A. C. BENSON

de-lys was as scrupulously and cleanly cut as if it had been meant to be seen close at hand; a waste of power, I suppose; but what a pretty and delicate waste! and done, I felt, in faithful days, when the carving was done as much to delight, if possible, the eye of God, as to please the eye of man. Higher and higher we went, till at last we reached the parapet. And then by a dizzy perpendicular ladder to which I committed myself in faith we reached a little platform on the very top of one of the pinnacles. The vane had just been fixed, and the stone was splashed with the oozing solder. And now came the delight of the huge view all round; the wooded heights, the rolling hills; old church towers rose from flowering orchards; a mansion peeped through immemorial trees; and far to the north-east we could see the white cliff of *Pegwell Bay*; endeared to me through the beautiful picture by Dyce, where the pale crags rise from the reefs green with untorn weeds. There on the horizon I could see shadowy sails on the steely sea-line.

Near at hand there were the streets, and then the Close, with its comfortable canonical houses, in green trim gardens, spread out like a map at my feet. We looked down on to the tops of tall elm-trees, and saw the rooks walking and sitting on the grey-splashed platforms of twigs, that swayed horribly in the breeze. It was pleasant to see, as I did, the tiny figure of my reverend host walking, a dot of black, in his garden beneath, reading in a book. The long grey-leaded roof ran broad and straight, a hundred feet below. One felt for a moment as a God might feel, looking on a corner of his created world, and seeing that it was good. One seemed to have surmounted the earth, and to watch the

CANTERBURY TOWER

little creeping orbits of men with a benevolent compassion, perceiving how strait they were. The large air hissed briskly in the pinnacles, and roared through the belfry windows beneath. I cannot describe the eager exhilaration which filled me; but I guessed that the impulse which bids men fling themselves from such heights is not a morbid prepossession, not a physical dizziness, but an intemperate and overwhelming joy. It seems at such a moment so easy to float and swim through the viewless air, as if one would be borne up on the wings of angels.

But, alas! the hour warned us to return. On our way down we disturbed a peevish jackdaw from her nest; she had dragged up to that intolerable height a pile of boughs that would have made a dozen nests; she had interwoven for the cup to hold her eggs a number of strips of purloined canvas. There lay the three speckled eggs, the hope of the race, while the chiding mother stood on a pinnacle hard by, waiting for the intruder to begone.

A strange sense of humiliation and smallness came upon me as we emerged at last into the nave; the people that had seemed so small and insignificant were, alas! as big and as important as myself; I felt as an exile from the porches of heaven, a fallen spirit.

From "The Thread of Gold"

SWITZERLAND

September 8, 1888

WE came back yesterday, after a very prosperous time at Zermatt; we have been there two entire months. Yes, it was certainly prosperous! We had delicious weather, and I have seen a number of pleasant people. I have done a great deal of walking, I have read a lot of novels and old poetry, I have sate about a good deal in the open air; but I do not really like Switzerland; there are of course an abundance of noble wide-hung views, but there are few vignettes, little on which the mind and heart dwell with an intimate and familiar satisfaction. Those airy pinnacles of toppling rocks, those sheets of slanted snow, those ice-bound crags—there is a sense of fear and mystery about them! One does not know what is going on there, what they are waiting for; they have no human meaning. They do not seem to have any relation to humanity at all. Sunday after Sunday one used to have sermons in that hot, trim little wooden church—some from quite famous preachers—about the need of rest, the advantage of letting the mind and eye dwell in awe upon the wonderful works of God. Of course the mountains are wonderful enough; but they make me feel that humanity plays a very trifling part in the mind and purpose of God. I do not think that if I were a preacher of the Gospel, and had a speculative turn, I should care to take a holiday among the mountains. I should be beset by a dreary wonder whether the welfare of humanity was a thing very dear to God at all. I

should feel very strongly what the Psalmist said, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" It would take the wind out of my sails, when I came to preach about Redemption, because I should be tempted to believe that, after all, human beings were only in the world on sufferance, and that the aching, frozen, barren earth, so inimical to life, was in even more urgent need of redemption. Day by day, among the heights, I grew to feel that I wanted some explanation of why the strange panorama of splintered crag and hanging ice-fall was there at all. It certainly is not there with any reference to man—at least it is hard to believe that it is all there that human beings may take a refreshing holiday in the midst of it. When one penetrates Switzerland by the green pine-clad valleys, passing through and beneath those delicious upland villages, each clustering round a church with a glittering cupola, the wooden houses with their brown fronts, their big eaves, perched up aloft at such pleasant angles, one thinks of Switzerland as an inhabited land of valleys, with screens and backgrounds of peaks and snowfields; but when one goes up higher still, and gets up to the top of one of the peaks, one sees that Switzerland is really a region of barren ridges, millions of acres of cold stones and ice, with a few little green cracks among the mountain bases, where men have crept to live; and that man is only tolerated there.

One day I was out with a guide on a peak at sunrise. Behind the bleak and shadowy ridges there stole a flush of awakening dawn; then came a line of the purest yellow light, touching the crags and snowfields with sharp blue shadows; the lemon-coloured radiance passed into fiery gold, the gold flushed to crimson, and

A. C. BENSON

then the sun leapt into sight, and shed the light of day upon the troubled sea of mountains. It was more than that—the hills made, as it were, the rim of a great cold shadowy goblet; and the light was poured into it from the uprushing sun, as bubbling and sparkling wine is poured into a beaker. I found myself thrilled from head to foot with an intense and mysterious rapture. What did it all mean, this awful and resplendent solemnity, full to the brim of a solitary and unapproachable holiness? What was the secret of the thing? Perhaps every one of those stars that we had seen fade out of the night was ringed round by planets such as ours, peopled by forms undreamed of; doubtless on millions of globes, the daylight of some central sun was coming in glory over the cold ridges, and waking into life sentient beings, in lands outside our ken, each with civilizations and histories and hopes and fears of their own. A stupendous and overwhelming thought! And yet, in the midst of it, here was I myself, a little consciousness sharply divided from it all, permitted to be a spectator, a partaker of the intolerable and gigantic mystery, and yet so strangely made that the whole of that vast and prodigious complexity of life and law counted for less to me than the touch of weariness that hung, after my long vigil, over limbs and brain. The faculty, the godlike power of knowing and imagining, all actually less to me than my own tiny and fragile sensations. Such moods as these are strange things, because they bring with them so intense a desire to know, to perceive, and yet paralyse one with the horror of the darkness in which one moves. One cannot conceive why it is that one is given the power of realizing the multiplicity of creation, and yet at the same time

SWITZERLAND

left so wholly ignorant of its significance. One longs to leap into the arms of God, to catch some whisper of His voice; and at the same time there falls the shadow of the prison-house; one is driven relentlessly back upon the old limited life, the duties, the labours, the round of meals and sleep, the tiny relations with others as ignorant as ourselves, and, still worse, with the petty spirits who have a complacent explanation of it all. Even over love itself the shadow falls. I am as near to my own dear and true Maud as it is possible to be; but I can tell her nothing of the mystery, and she can tell me nothing. We are allowed for a time to draw close to each other, to whisper to each other our hopes and fears; but at any moment we can be separated. The children, Alec and Maggie, dearer to me—I can say it honestly—than life itself, to whom we have given being, whose voices I hear as I write, what of them? They are each of them alone, though they hardly know it yet. The little unnamed son, who opened his eyes upon the world six years ago, to close them in a few hours, where and what is he now? Is he somewhere, anywhere? Does he know of the joy and sorrow he has brought into our lives? I would fain believe it . . . these are profitless thoughts, of one staring into the abyss. Somehow these bright weeks have been to me a dreary time. I am well in health; nothing ails me. It is six months since my last book was published, and I have taken a deliberate holiday; but always before, my mind, the strain of a book once taken off it, has begun to sprout and burgeon with new ideas and schemes: but now, for the first time in my life, my mind and heart remain bare and arid. I seem to have drifted into a dreary silence. It is not that things have been less beautiful,

A. C. BENSON

but beauty seems to have had no message, no significance for me. The people that I have seen have come and gone like ghosts and puppets. I have had no curiosity about them, their occupations and thoughts, their hopes and loves; it has not seemed worth while to be interested in a life which appears so short, and which leads nowhere. It seems morbid to write thus, but I have not been either morbid or depressed. It has been an easy life, the life of the last few months, without effort or dissatisfaction, but without zest. It is a mental tiredness, I suppose. I have written myself out, and the cistern must fill again. Yet I have had no feeling of fatigue. It would have been almost better to have had something to bear; but I am richer than I need be, Maud and the children have been in perfect health and happiness, I have been well and strong. I shall hope that the familiar scene, the pleasant activities of home-life, will bring the desire back. I realize how much the fabric of my life is built upon my writing, and write I must. Well, I have said enough; the pleasure of these entries is that one can look back to them, and see the movement of the current of life in a bygone day. I have an immense mass of arrears to make up, in the form of letters and business, but I want to survey the ground; and the survey is not a very happy one this morning; though if I made a list of my benefits and the reverse, like Robinson Crusoe, the credit side would be full of good things, and the debit side nearly empty.

From "The Altar Fire"

HOME

September 15, 1888

IT is certainly very sweet to be at home again; to find oneself in familiar scenes, with all the pretty homely comfortable things waiting patiently for us to return—pictures, books, rooms, trees, kindly people. Wright, my excellent gardener, with whom I spent an hour strolling round the garden to-day, touched me by saying that he was glad to see me back, and that it had seemed dull without me; he has done fifty little simple things in our absence, in his tranquil and faithful way, and is pleased to have them noticed. Alec, who was with me to-day, delighted me by finding his stolid wooden horse in the summer-house, rather damp and dishevelled, and almost bursting into tears at the pathos of the neglect. "Did you think we had forgotten you?" he said as he hugged it. I suggested that he should have a good meal. "I don't think he would care about *grass*," said Alec thoughtfully, "he shall have some leaves and berries for a treat." And this was tenderly executed. Maud went off to see some of her old pensioners, and came back glowing with pleasure, with twenty pleasant stories of welcome. Two or three people came in to see me on business, and I was glad to feel I was of use. In the afternoon we all went off on a long ramble together, and we were quite surprised to see that everything seemed to be in its place as usual. Summer is over, the fields have been reaped; there is a comfortable row of stacks in the rickyard; the pleasant humming of an engine came up the valley,

A. C. BENSON

as it sang its homely monotone, now low, now loud. After tea—the evenings have begun to close in—I went off to my study, took out my notebook and looked over my subjects, but I could make nothing of any of them. I could see that there were some good ideas among them; but none of them took shape. Often I have found that to glance over my subjects thus, after a holiday, is like blowing soap-bubbles. The idea comes out swelling and eddying from the bowl; a globe swimming with lucent hues, reflecting dim moving shapes of rooms and figures. Not so to-day. My mind winked and flapped and rustled like a burnt-out fire; not in a depressed or melancholy way, but phlegmatically and dully. Well, the spirit bloweth as it listeth; but it is strange to find my mind so unresponsive, with none of that pleasant stir, that excitement that has a sort of fantastic terror about it, such as happens when a book stretches itself dimly and mysteriously before the mind—when one has a glimpse of a quiet room with people talking, a man riding fiercely on lonely roads, two strolling together in a moonlit garden, with the shadows of the cypresses on the turf, and the fragrance of the sleeping flowers blown abroad. They stop to listen to the nightingale in the bush . . . they turn to each other . . . the currents of life are intermingled at the meeting of the lips, the warm shudder at the touch of the floating tress of fragrant hair. To-day nothing comes to me; I throw it all aside and go to see the children, am greeted delightfully, and join in some pretty and absurd game. Then dinner comes; and I sit afterwards reading, dropping the book to talk, Maud working in her corner by the fire—all things moving so tranquilly and easily in this pleasantly

ordered home-like house of ours. It is good to be at home; and how pitiful to be hankering thus for something else to fill the mind, which should obliterate all the beloved things so tenderly provided. Maud asks about the reception of the latest book, and sparkles with pride at some of the things I tell her. She sees somehow—how do women divine these things?—that there is a little shadow of unrest over me, and she tells me all the comforting things that I dare not say to myself,—that it is only that the book took more out of me than I knew, and that the resting-time is not over yet; but that I shall soon settle down again. Then I go off to smoke awhile; and then the haunting shadow comes back for a little; till at last I go softly through the sleeping house; and presently lie listening to the quiet breathing of my wife beside me, glad to be at home again, until the thoughts grow blurred, take grotesque shapes, sinking softly into repose.

From "The Altar Fire"

SHYNESS

I HAVE no doubt that shyness is one of the old, primitive, aboriginal qualities that lurk in human nature—one of the crude elements that ought to have been uprooted by civilization, and security, and progress, and enlightened ideals, but which have not been uprooted, and are only being slowly eliminated. It is seen, as all aboriginal qualities are seen, at its barest among children, who often reflect the youth of the world, and are like little wild animals or infant savages, in spite of all the frenzied idealization that childhood receives from well-dressed and amiable people.

Shyness is thus like those little bits of woods and copses which one finds in a country-side that has long been subdued and replenished, turned into arable land and pasture, with all the wildness and the irregularity ploughed and combed out of it; but still one comes upon some piece of dingle, where there is perhaps an awkward tilt in the ground, or some ancient excavation, or where a stream-head has cut out a steep channel, and there one finds a scrap of the old forest, a rood or two that has never been anything but woodland. So with shyness; many of our old, savage qualities have been smoothed out, or glazed over, by education and inheritance, and only emerge in moments of passion and emotion. But shyness is no doubt the old suspicion of the stranger, the belief that his motives are likely to be predatory and sinister; it is the tendency to bob the head down into the brushwood, or to sneak behind the tree-bole

on his approach. One sees a little child, washed and brushed and delicately apparelled, with silken locks and clear complexion, brought into a drawing-room to be admired; one sees the terror come upon her; she knows by experience that she has nothing to expect but attention, and admiration, and petting; but you will see her suddenly cover her face with a tiny hand, relapse into dismal silence, even burst into tears and refuse to be comforted, till she is safely entrenched upon some familiar knee.

I have a breezy, boisterous, cheerful friend, of transparent simplicity and goodness, who has never known the least touch of shyness from his cradle, who always says, if the subject is introduced, that shyness is all mere self-consciousness, and that it comes from thinking about oneself. That is true, in a limited degree; but the diagnosis is no remedy for the disease, because shyness is as much a disease as a cold in the head, and no amount of effort can prevent the attacks of the complaint; the only remedy is either to avoid the occasions of the attacks,—and that is impossible, unless one is to abjure the society of other people for good and all;—or else to practise resolutely the hardening process of frequenting society, until one gets a sort of courage out of familiarity. Yet even so, who that has ever really suffered from shyness does not feel his heart sink as he drives up in a brougham to the door of some strange house, and sees a grave butler, advancing out of an unknown corridor, with figures flitting to and fro in the background; what shy person is there who at such a moment would not give a considerable sum to be able to go back to the station and take the first train home? Or who again, as he gives his name to a servant

A. C. BENSON

in some brightly-lighted hall, and advances, with a hurried glance at his toilet, into a roomful of well-dressed people, buzzing with what Rossetti calls a "din of doubtful talk," would not prefer to sink into the earth like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and be reckoned no more among the living?

It is recorded in Tennyson's *Life* that he used to recommend to a younger brother the thought of the stellar spaces, swarming with constellations and traversed by planets at ineffable distances, as a cure for shyness; and a lady of my acquaintance used to endeavour as a girl to stay her failing heart on the thought of Eternity at such moments. It is all in vain; at the urgent moment one cares very little about the stellar motions, or the dim vistas of futurity, and very much indeed about the cut of one's coat, and the appearance of one's collar, and the glances of one's enemies; the doctrines of the Church, and the prospects of ultimate salvation, are things very light in the scales, in comparison with the pressing necessities of the crisis, and the desperate need to appear wholly unconcerned!

The wild and fierce shyness of childhood is superseded in most sensitive people, as life goes on, by a very different feeling—the shyness of adolescence, of which the essence, as has been well said, is "a shamefaced pride." The shyness of early youth is a thing which springs from an intense desire to delight, and impress, and interest other people, from wanting to play a far larger and brighter part in the lives of every one else than anyone in the world plays in anyone else's life. Who does not recognize, with a feeling that is half contempt and half compassion, the sight of the eager

pretentiousness of youth, the intense shame of confessing ignorance on any point, the deep desire to appear to have a stake in the world, and a well-defined, respected position? I met the other day a young man, of no particular force or distinction, who was standing in a corner at a big social gathering, bursting with terror and importance combined. He was inspired, I would fain believe, by discerning a vague benevolence in my air and demeanour, to fix his attention on me. He had been staying at a house where there had been some important guests, and by some incredibly rapid transition of eloquence he was saying to me in a minute or two, "The Commander-in-Chief said to me the other day," and "The Archbishop pointed out to me a few days ago," giving, as personal confidences, scraps of conversation which he had no doubt overheard as an unwelcome adjunct to a crowded smoking-room, with the busy and genial elders wondering when the boys would have the grace to go to bed. My heart bled for him as I saw the reflection of my own pushing and pretentious youth, and I only desired that the curse should not fall upon him which has so often fallen upon myself, to recall ineffaceably, with a blush that still mantles my cheek in the silence and seclusion of my bedroom, in a wakeful hour, the thought of some such piece of transparent and ridiculous self-importance, shamefully uttered by myself, in a transport of ambitious vanity, long years ago. How out of proportion to the offence is the avenging phantom of memory which dogs one through the years for such stupidities! I remember that as a youthful undergraduate I went to stay in the house of an old family friend in the neighbourhood of Cambridge. The only other male guest was a grim

A. C. BENSON

and crusty don, sharp and trenchant in speech, and with a determination to keep young men in their place. At Cambridge he would have taken no notice whatever of me; but there, on alien ground, with some lurking impulse of far-off civility, he said to me when the ladies retired, "I am going to have a cigar; you know your way to the smoking-room?" I did not myself smoke in those days, so foolish was I and innocent; but recalling, I suppose, some similar remark made by an elderly and genial non-smoker under the same circumstances, I said pompously—I can hardly bring myself even now to write the words—"I don't smoke, but I will come and sit with you for the pleasure of a talk." He gave a derisive snort, looked at me and said, "What! not allowed to smoke yet? Pray don't trouble to come on my account." It was not a genial speech, and it made me feel, as it was intended to do, insupportably silly. I did not make matters better, I recollect, on the following day, when on returning to Cambridge I offered to carry his bag up from the station, for he insisted on walking. He refused testily, and no doubt thought me, as in fact I was, a very spiritless young man.

I remember, too, another incident of the same kind, happening about the same time. I was invited by a fellow-undergraduate to come to tea in his rooms, and to meet his people. After tea, in the lightness of his heart, my friend performed some singular antics, such as standing on his head like a clown, and falling over the back of his sofa, alighting on his feet. I, who would not have executed such gambols for the world in the presence of the fairer sex, but anxious in an elderly way to express my sympathy with the performer, said, with what was meant to be a polite admiration: "I can't

think how you do that!" Upon which a shrewd and trenchant maiden-aunt who was present, and was delighting in the exuberance of her nephew, said to me briskly, "Mr Benson, have you never been young?" I should be ashamed to say how often since I have arranged a neat repartee to that annoying question. At the same time I think that the behaviour both of the don and the aunt was distinctly unjust and unadvisable. I am sure that the one way to train young people out of the miseries of shyness is for older people never to snub them in public, or make them appear in the light of a fool. Such snubs fall plentifully and naturally from contemporaries. An elder person is quite within his rights in inflicting a grave and serious remonstrance in private. I do not believe that young people ever resent that, if at the same time they are allowed to defend themselves and state their case. But a merciless elder who inflicts a public mortification is terribly unassailable and impregnable. For the shy person, who is desperately anxious to bear a sympathetic part, is quite incapable of retort; and that is why such assaults are unpardonable, because they are the merest bullying.

The nicest people that I have known in life have been the people of kindly and sensible natures, who have been thoroughly spoilt as children, encouraged to talk, led to expect not only toleration, but active kindness and sympathy from all. The worst of it is that such kindness is generally reserved for pretty and engaging children, and it is the awkward, unpleasing, ungainly child who gets the slaps in public. But, as in Tennyson-Turner's pretty poem of *Letty's Globe*, a child's hand should be "welcome at all frontiers."

A. C. BENSON

Only deliberate rudeness and insolence on the part of children should be publicly rebuked; and as a matter of fact both rudeness and insolence are far oftener the result of shyness than is easily supposed.

After the shyness of adolescence there often follows a further stage. The shy person has learnt a certain wisdom; he becomes aware how easily he detects pretentiousness in other people, and realizes that there is nothing to be gained by claiming a width of experience which he does not possess, and that the being unmasked is even more painful than feeling deficient and ill-equipped. Then too he learns to suspect that when he has tried to be impressive, he has often only succeeded in being priggish; and the result is that he falls into a kind of speechlessness, comforting himself, as he sits mute and awkward, unduly elongated, and with unaccountable projections of limb and feature, that if only other people were a little less self-absorbed, had the gift of perceiving hidden worth and real character, and could pierce a little below the surface, they would realize what reserves of force and tenderness lay beneath the heavy shapelessness of which he is still conscious. Then is the time for the shy person to apply himself to social gymnastics. He is not required to be voluble; but if he will practise bearing a hand, seeing what other people need and like, carrying on their line of thought, constructing small conversational bridges, asking the right questions, perhaps simulating an interest in the pursuits of others which he does not naturally feel, he may unloose the burden from his back. Then is the time to practise a sympathetic smile, or better still to allow oneself to indicate and even express the sympathy one feels; and the experimentalist will soon become

aware how welcome such unobtrusive sympathy is. He will be amazed at first to find that, instead of being tolerated, he will be confided in; he will be regarded as a pleasant adjunct to a party, and he will soon have the even pleasanter experience of finding that his own opinions and adventures, if they are not used to cap and surpass the opinions and adventures of others, but to elicit them, will be duly valued. Yet, alas, a good many shy people never reach that stage, but take refuge in a critical and fastidious attitude. I had an elderly relative of this kind—who does not know the type?—who was a man of wide interests and accurate information, but a perfect terror in the domestic circle. He was too shy to mingle in general talk, but sat with an air of acute observation, with a dry smile playing over his face; later on, when the circle diminished, it pleased him to retail the incautious statements made by various members of the party, and correct them with much acerbity. There are few things more terrific than a man who is both speechless and distinguished. I have known several such, and their presence lies like a blight over the most cheerful party. It is unhappily often the case that shyness is apt to exist side by side with considerable ability, and a shy man of this type regards distinction as a kind of defensive armour, which may justify him in applying to others the contempt which he has himself been conscious of incurring. One of the most disagreeable men I know is a man of great ability, who was bullied in his youth. The result upon him has been that he tends to believe that most people are inspired by a vague malevolence, and he uses his ability and his memory, not to add to the pleasure of a party, but to make his own power felt. I have seen

A. C. BENSON

this particular man pass from an ungainly speechlessness into brutal onslaughts on inoffensive persons; and it is one of the most unpleasant transformations in the world. On the other hand, the modest and amiable man of distinction is one of the most agreeable figures it is possible to encounter. He is kind and deferential, and the indulgent deference of a distinguished man is worth its weight in gold.

I was lately told a delightful story of a great statesman staying with a humble and anxious host, who had invited a party of simple and unimportant people to meet the great man. The statesman came in late for dinner, and was introduced to the party; he made a series of old-fashioned bows in all directions, but no one felt in a position to offer any observations. The great man, at the conclusion of the ceremony, turned to his host, and said, in tones that had often thrilled a listening senate: "What very convenient jugs you have in your bedrooms! They pour well!" The social frost broke up; the company were delighted to find that the great man was interested in mundane matters of a kind on which every one might be permitted to have an opinion, and the conversation, starting from the humblest conveniences of daily life, melted insensibly into more liberal subjects. The fact is that, in ordinary life, kindness and simplicity are valued far more than brilliance; and the best brilliance is that which throws a novel and lambent light upon ordinary topics, rather than the brilliance which disports itself in unfamiliar and exalted regions. The hero only ceases to be a hero to his valet if he is too lofty-minded to enter into the workings of his valet's mind, and cannot duly appraise the quality of his services.

And then, too, to go back a little, there are certain defects, after all, which are appropriate at different times of life. A certain degree of shyness and even awkwardness is not at all a disagreeable thing—indeed it is rather a desirable quality—in the young. A perfectly self-possessed and voluble young man arouses in one a vague sense of hostility, unless it is accompanied by great modesty and ingenuousness. The artless prattler, who, in his teens, has an opinion on all subjects, and considers that opinion worth expressing, is pleasant enough, and saves one some embarrassment; but such people, alas, too often degenerate into the bores of later life. If a man's opinion is eventually going to be worth anything, he ought, I think, to pass through a tumultuous and even prickly stage, when he believes that he has an opinion, but cannot find the *aplomb* to formulate it. He ought to be feeling his way, to be in a vague condition of revolt against what is conventional. This is likely to be true not only in his dealings with his elders, but also in his dealings with his contemporaries. Young people are apt to regard a youthful *doctrinaire*, who has an opinion on everything, with sincere abhorrence. He bores them, and to the young boredom is not a condition of passive suffering, it is an acute form of torture. Moreover, the stock of opinions which a young man holds are apt to be parrot-cries repeated without any coherence from talks overheard and books skimmed. But in a modest and ingenuous youth, filled to the brim with eager interest and alert curiosity, a certain deference is an adorable thing, one of the most delicate of graces; and it is a delightful task for an older person, who feels the sense of youthful charm, to melt stiffness away by kindly irony and gentle provocation, as

A. C. BENSON

Socrates did with his sweet-natured and modest boy-friends so many centuries ago. †

The *aplomb* of the young generally means complacency; but one who is young and shy, and yet has the grace to think about the convenience and pleasure of others, can be the most perfect companion in the world. One has then a sense of the brave and unsophisticated freshness of youth, that believes all things and hopes all things, the bloom of which has not been rubbed away by the rough touch of the world. It is only when that shyness is prolonged beyond the appropriate years, when it leaves a well-grown and hard-featured man gasping and incoherent, jerky and ungracious, that it is a painful and disconcerting deformity. The only real shadow of early shyness is the quite disproportionate amount of unhappiness that conscious *gaucherie* brings with it. Two incidents connected with a ceremony most fruitful in nervousness come back to my mind.

When I was an Eton boy, I was staying with a country squire, a most courteous old gentleman with a high temper. The first morning, I contrived to come down a minute or two late for prayers. There was no chair for me. The Squire suspended his reading of the Bible with a deadly sort of resignation, and made a gesture to the portly butler. That functionary rose from his own chair, and with loudly creaking boots carried it across the room for my acceptance. I sat down, covered with confusion. The butler returned; and two footmen, who were sitting on a little form, made reluctant room for him. The butler sat down on one end of the form, unfortunately before his equipoise, the second footman, had taken his place at the

other end. The result was that the form tipped up, and a cataract of flunkies poured down upon the floor. There was a ghastly silence; then the Gadarene herd slowly recovered itself, and resumed its place. The Squire read the chapter in an accent of suppressed fury, while the remainder of the party, with handkerchiefs pressed to their faces, made the most unaccountable sounds and motions for the rest of the proceeding. I was really comparatively guiltless, but the shadow of that horrid event sensibly clouded the whole of my visit.

I was only a spectator of the other event. We had assembled for prayers in the dimly-lighted hall of the house of a church dignitary, and the chapter had begun, when a man of almost murderous shyness, who was a guest, opened his bedroom door and came down the stairs. Our host suspended his reading. The unhappy man came down, but, instead of slinking to his place, went and stood in front of the fire, under the impression that the proceedings had not taken shape, and addressed some remarks upon the weather to his hostess. In the middle of one of his sentences, he suddenly divined the situation, on seeing the row of servants sitting in a thievish corner of the hall. He took his seat with the air of a man driving to the guillotine, and I do not think I ever saw anyone so much upset as he was for the remainder of his stay. Of course it may be said that a sense of humour should have saved a man from such a collapse of moral force, but a sense of humour requires to be very strong to save a man from the sense of having made a conspicuous fool of himself.

I would add one more small reminiscence, of an

A. C. BENSON

event from which I can hardly say with honesty that I have yet quite recovered, although it took place nearly thirty years ago. I went, as a schoolboy, with my parents, to stay at a very big country house, the kind of place to which I was little used, where the advent of a stately footman to take away my clothes in the morning used to fill me with misery. The first evening there was a big dinner-party. I found myself sitting next my delightful and kindly hostess, my father being on the other side of her. All went well till dessert, when an amiable, long-haired spaniel came to my side to beg of me. I had nothing but grapes on my plate, and purely out of compliment I offered him one. He at once took it in his mouth, and hurried to a fine white fur rug in front of the hearth, where he indulged in some unaccountable convulsions, rolling himself about and growling in an ecstasy of delight. My host, an irascible man, looked round, and then said: "Who the devil has given that dog a grape?" He added to my father, by way of explanation, "The fact is that if he can get hold of a grape, he rolls it on that rug, and it is no end of a nuisance to get the stain out." I sat crimson with guilt, and was just about to falter out a confession, when my hostess looked up, and, seeing what had happened, said, "It was me, Frank—I forgot for the moment what I was doing." My gratitude for this angelic intervention was so great that I had not even the gallantry to own up, and could only repay my protectress with an intense and lasting devotion. I have no doubt that she explained matters afterwards to our host; and I contrived to murmur my thanks later in the evening. But the shock had been a terrible one, and taught me not only wisdom, but the Christian duty

of intervening, if I could, to save the shy from their sins and sufferings.

Taught by the Power that pities me,
I learn to pity them:

But the consideration that emerges from these reminiscences is the somewhat bewildering one, that shyness is a thing which seems to be punished, both by immediate discomfort and by subsequent fantastic remorse, far more heavily than infinitely more serious moral lapses. The repentance that follows sin can hardly be more poignant than the agonizing sense of guilt which steals over the waking consciousness on the morning that follows some such social lapse. In fact it must be confessed that most of us dislike appearing fools far more than we dislike feeling knaves; so that one wonders whether one does not dread the ridicule and disapproval of society more than one dreads the sense of a lapse from morality; the philosophical outcome of which would seem to be that the verdict of society upon our actions is at the base of morality. We may feel assured that the result of moral lapses will ultimately be that we shall have to face the wrath of our Creator; but one hopes that side by side with justice will be found a merciful allowance for the force of temptation. But the final judgment is in any case not imminent, while the result of a social lapse is that we have to continue to face a disapproving and even a contemptuous circle, who will remember our failure with malicious pleasure, and whose sense of justice will not be tempered by any appreciable degree of mercy. Here again is a discouraging circumstance, that when we call to mind some similarly compromising and

A. C. BENSON

grotesque adventure in the life of one of our friends, in spite of the fact that we well know the distress that the incident must have caused him, we still continue to hug, and even to repeat, our recollection of the occasion with a rich sense of joy. Is it that we do not really desire the peace and joy of others? It would seem so. How many of us are not conscious of feeling extremely friendly and helpful when our friend is in sorrow, or difficulty, or discredit, and yet of having no taste for standing by and applauding when our friend is joyful and successful! There is nothing, it seems, that we can render to our friend in the latter case, except the praise of which he has already had enough!

It seems then that the process of anatomizing the nature and philosophy of shyness only ends in stripping off, one by one, as from an onion, the decent integuments of the human spirit, and revealing it every moment more and more in its native rankness. Let me forbear, consoling myself with the thought that the qualities of human beings are not meant to be taken up one by one, like coins from a tray, and scrutinized; but that what matters is the general effect, the blending, the grouping, the mellowed surface, the warped line. I was only yesterday in an old church, where I saw an ancient font-cover—a sort of carved extinguisher—and some dark panels of a rood-screen. They had been, both cover and panels, coarsely and brightly painted and gilt; and, horrible to reflect, it flashed upon me that they must have once been both glaring and vulgar. Yet to-day the dim richness of the effect, the dints, the scaling-off of the flakes, the fading of the pigment, the dulling of the gold, were incomparable; and I began to wonder if perhaps that was not what happened

SHYNESS

to us in life; and that though we foolishly regretted the tarnishing of the bright surfaces of soul and body with our passions and tempers and awkwardnesses and feeblenesses, yet perhaps it was, after all, that we were taking on an unsuspected beauty, and making ourselves fit, some far-off day, for the Communion of Saints!

From "At Large"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(The publishers of books at present out of print are not given.)

- 1887 : *William Laud, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury.*
1893 : *Poems* (Lane).
1895 : *Babylonica. Lyrics.*
1896 : *Essays.*
1897 : *Lord Vyet, and other Poems* (Lane).
1899 : *The Life of Edward White Benson. Fasti Etonienses.*
1900 : *The Professor, and other Poems* (Lane).
1901 : *The House of Quiet : An Autobiography* (Murray).
1902 : *The Schoolmaster.*
1903 : *The Hill of Trouble.*
1904 : *Rossetti* (Macmillan). *Alfred Tennyson.*
1905 : *Edward Fitzgerald* (Macmillan). *The Isles of Sunset. Peace, and other Poems* (Lane). *The Thread of Gold* (Murray). *The Upton Letters* (Murray).
1906 : *From a College Window* (Murray). *The Gate of Death* (Murray). *Walter Pater* (Macmillan).
1907 : *The Altar Fire. Beside Still Waters.*
1908 : *At Large.*
1910 : *The Silent Isle* (Murray).
1911 : *The Leaves of the Tree* (Murray). *Ruskin* (Murray).
1912 : *Thy Rod and Thy Staff* (Murray). *The Child of the Dawn.*

A. C. BENSON

- 1913 : *Along the Road* (Murray). *Joyous Gard. Water-springs* (Murray).
- 1914 : *Where no Fear was* (Murray). *The Orchard Pavilion* (Murray).
- 1915 : *Hugh: Memoirs of a Brother* (Murray). *Father Pay* (Murray). *Escape, and other Essays* (Murray).
- 1917 : *Life and Letters of Maggie Benson* (Murray).
- 1922 : *The Reed of Pan* (Murray).
- 1923 : *The Trefoil: Wellington College, Lincoln, and Trav* (Murray).
- 1924 : *Chris Gascoyne* (Murray). *Memories and Friend* (Murray).
- 1925 : *The House of Menerdue* (Heinemann).